

# STATE OF NEBRASKA

## NEBRASKA COMMISSION FOR THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING

*Executive Director*



**Dave Heineman**  
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## Interpreting Juggernaut: Filling Assignments with Short Lead Time NCDHH, task force offer three key solutions

Flower Nunez, presiding over the interpreter services department at Nebraska Medical Center, displays her candor and impeccable command of one of healthcare's ancestral yet innovative programs. The coordinator of accommodations for text translation and language interpreting recently lifted a veil on an issue many Nebraska businesses have been pondering for years: a shortage of American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters.

Nunez disclosed in an interview that the Omaha hospital recently had two cases where an ASL interpreter could not be found for patient emergencies. While not an every day occurrence, she emphatically states, "Even once is too much."

The Medical Center has had an interpreter services department for 20 years — one of the oldest in the Midwest — and recently earned high marks from Nebraska Health and Human Services for its innovation and excellence standards. Scheduling is paperless, streamlined to exceed HIPPA requirements for confidentiality, and rapport has been solidified with dependable interpreters for appointments six months to one year in advance.

Yet, short lead times are a growing problem, Nunez admits.

"The deaf community is not necessarily growing," she says. "Rather, it's that as the deaf age, their needs are more acute. They need emergency care now; appointments are less routine and are rarely simple follow-up health exams."

Consumers reliant on interpreters, in this case the hospital patient, have most to lose when interpreters don't appear for appointments.

"I don't like to see anybody waiting in ER longer than they have to," Nunez says. "It's human reflex if you can't communicate verbally with someone to avoid them. That's terrible in a hospital setting. We must be able to get them triaged and find their immediate needs."

### Everyone is Affected

Nancy Lammers, Employment Specialist, State of Nebraska Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, agrees, identifying two implications when interpreters can't be found to fill communication needs.

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### Interpreting Juggernaut Continued from page 1

“First, deaf individuals fight communication obstacles daily and often internalize a lack of service as a lack of caring. That’s not a good image for service-oriented businesses. Secondly, from the business’s perspective, an interpreter no-show can reinforce stereotypes that people with hearing loss are time-consuming or a hassle to employ. Frankly, it risks some individuals a chance at jobs in the future. We live in an employer-driven marketplace.”

Both Nunez and Lammers point out that they still see more ASL interpreter appointments cancelled last minute by end-users than by service providers, but more industries experience otherwise — byproducts of the state’s interpreter shortage.

### By the Numbers

According to statistics released by the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, NCDHH, fill rates for ASL assignments have worsened by 30 percent since 2002. Four years ago, eight percent of assignments in the Greater Omaha-Lincoln area went unfilled. In 2005, 35 percent went unfilled. In the first three months of 2006, 50 percent of interpreter assignments in the region have gone unfilled.

“NCDHH once matched three times more total assignments than we will in 2006, yet today the percentage of unmatched assignments is incredibly higher,” says Tanya Wendel, Executive Director, NCDHH. “Part of the answer lies in the fact that ASL interpreters have become more entrepreneurial.”

How so?

Interpreters occasionally take assignments less demanding and more lucrative at the last minute. Court and legal-related assignments take a back seat when jobs requiring less intensity and better pay come along.

“Mix that entrepreneurial spirit with a smaller pool of certified interpreters and you have a recipe for trouble if the deaf need help quickly,” Wendel adds. “Education is sapping up many service providers. For example, the University of Nebraska-Omaha, Metropolitan Community College, Southeast Community College, and other institutions are attracting more deaf students than ever. Some interpreters assist doctorate or chemistry students 20 hours more per week than they used to.”

The result is a backlog of interpreting assignments. More businesses reschedule meetings, sometimes unnecessarily. One example is when an interpreter’s schedule changes momentarily, freeing them to handle meetings with short lead times, but nobody else knows it. Communication between interpreters, businesses, and NCDHH which links them together, is the obstacle.

### Bubbles in the Process

NCDHH is working with an interpreter task force to identify snags in the process of matching short-lead time jobs to interpreters. Key issues include:

- **Schedule Awareness.** An ill student, canceled classes, or vacation often frees an interpreter working in education to do other work. Yet,

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### Interpreting Juggernaut Continued from page 2

- often interpreters fail to notify referral schedulers that they're available.
- **Hard-to-Reach Interpreters.** Schedulers often cannot reach interpreters, or don't receive call backs for open jobs. Reasons include that interpreters may work elsewhere or attend class in the daytime and don't check messages until after 5:00 p.m.
- **Interpreters Who Over-Commit.** High demand for ASL interpreters encourages many to schedule appointments tightly. At the last minute, an interpreter may realize they can't do them all, cancelling one or more meetings.
- **Balance Between Entrepreneurs and Ethics.** Interpreters who commit weeks in advance to aid a deaf individual, then back out for higher paying jobs that come along leaves the deaf short-changed and burdens businesses with wasted time, paperwork, and extra costs. Left with an opening on short notice, a business may be forced to pay more for a different interpreter traveling from further away.
- **Businesses That Double Book.** People from different departments in a business calling schedulers for the same appointment falsely shrink the pool of available interpreters.
- **Business/Consumer Education.** Many businesses fail to plan ahead, unaware of the interpreter shortage, then request help for non-emergency meetings at the last minute.

### Future Solutions

Industry leaders are now discussing several solutions to improving interpreting services in Nebraska, especially for short-notice assignments. They include:

- **Developing an Interpreter On-Call Schedule.** Proposed is the idea that interpreters voluntarily schedule with NCDHH one half-day per month (a morning or afternoon) that they will be available for last-minute emergency requests.
- **Text Messaging.** Because unreturned phone calls can be a cliff-hanging experience for schedulers, one proposal is that NCDHH text message a batch of interpreters for emergency assignments. It would reduce phone time for schedulers, and with some (but not all) cell phone plans, text messaging is cheaper than talk minutes.
- **VRI.** Proposed since December 2005 is increase education of businesses needing immediate interpreting services about videoconferencing options, or Video Remote Interpreting (VRI).

Interpreting from all sides is a communication juggernaut, Nunez says.

"One of our problems, for various reasons, used to be that contract interpreters showed up for assignments because they incorrectly assumed they were scheduled, or weren't informed about cancellations. When you're paying \$80 per hour and two-hour minimums, communication issues become budget problems.

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### **Interpreting Juggernaut Continued from page 3**

“Today, we have new challenges. The American with Disabilities Act mandates that accommodations be readily accessible for people with disabilities, such as visual or hearing loss. It now includes language needs. We must provide assistance for emergency situations. That’s why our business is taking back some of the interpreting responsibility.”

Part of the Medical Center’s solution is to implement VRI for emergency use. NCDHH has helped them, and continues to investigate other ideas, including the feasibility of offering web-based scheduling with an interpreter rating system that may render several concerns mute.

Interpreters interested in commenting on this article or providing suggestions for the interpreting task force on meeting the needs of businesses with emergencies, may contact NCDHH toll free at 800-545-6244.

### **About NCDHH**

The Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NCDHH) is a state agency providing education, referral information, and technical devices to aid hearing and communication between residents, businesses, and organizations. Sign language interpreter referral, interpreter certification, advocacy, equipment loan, and mental health referral services are provided. Call (402) 471-3593 for more information, or visit us online, [www.ncdhh.ne.gov](http://www.ncdhh.ne.gov).

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